



Connecticut State Parks and Boat Launches Operational Plan



Overview

State Parks, Forests, Boat Launches, and other state outdoor recreation areas comprise over 255,000 acres spread across the state, representing over 7% of the state's land area. These public open spaces have been providing the opportunity for individuals and immediate families and to get outside and exercise in these difficult and stressful times. This Operational Plan provides current guidelines for DEEP staff and visitors for the operation and use of Connecticut State Park grounds, trails, beaches, boat launches and other areas, in a manner that is consistent with social distancing guidelines. This Plan is based on consultation with the Connecticut Department of Public Health (DPH), and guidance [documents](#) and [executive orders](#) associated with the public health emergency. This Plan is also informed by Centers for Disease Control (CDC) [guidance issued for the parks and recreation sectors](#). This Plan will be updated as new information and operational conditions require.

Any questions about this guidance should be referred to deep.stateparks@ct.gov. Any questions about COVID-related health issues associated with outdoor recreation activities should be referred to the [Connecticut Department of Public Health](#).

General Physical Space & Occupancy Limits

Connecticut's State Parks and State Forest recreation areas remain open system-wide and available for the public to enjoy, while practicing social distancing. State Park and State Forest recreation areas are currently implementing operational changes to eliminate gatherings of groups of six or more people, and ensure minimum distances of six feet between visitors. Park buildings, museums, nature centers and most other enclosed structures, including restrooms, have been closed to the public indefinitely, as have two state parks (Kent Falls and Seaside State Parks).

Health Advisory for Visitors

While this guidance provides a way for the public to enjoy Connecticut's State Parks, Forests and Boat Launches as safely as possible, risks to visitors cannot be fully mitigated. Visitors who choose to visit these facilities during this time should be aware of the potential risks. Individuals over the age of 65 or with underlying health conditions should consider not visiting state parks, particularly on warm weather days or during peak mid-day times when visitor numbers are high.

If you are not feeling well, stay home! Signs and symptoms of coronavirus include fever, cough and shortness of breath. A full list of signs and symptoms of COVID-19 is available from the CDC.

- Stay close to home. Do not travel long distances to parks or other recreational areas.
- Avoid crowded recreational areas.
- Practice proper social distancing; stay at least 6 feet from other people.
- Wear a face covering over the nose and mouth, at all times when proper social distancing cannot be maintained.
- Engage in outdoor recreational activities with members of your household, only.
- Practice good hygiene when outdoors. Wash your hands, carry and use hand sanitizer, cover your mouth and nose when sneezing and coughing, and avoid surfaces that are often touched: picnic tables, doorknobs, handrails, equipment, etc.

Social Distancing Measures

Indefinite Closure

At this time, Kent Falls State Park in Kent and Seaside State Park in Waterford are closed indefinitely. Certain park features that are not physically conducive to maintaining a minimum of 6' between visitors have been closed: e.g., certain narrow boardwalks at Silver Sands State Park. Evaluation continues of other similar areas.

Restrictions on Gathering Size

- Indoor and outdoor structures where the public tends to congregate have been closed to the public indefinitely. These include visitor centers, Gillette Castle, the mansion at Harkness Memorial State Park, and the tower at Sleeping Giant.
- **Picnic shelters have been closed to groups.** They are open for individual use only and social distancing must be maintained. Signage has been posted to alert visitors.
- **Picnicking is limited in parks.** Tables have been removed or stacked in many locations with signage posted notifying their use is prohibited. Groups of 5 or less (household members only) are permitted to sit on the ground and eat food. DEEP is not disinfecting picnic tables.
- DEEP staff are actively monitoring usage of our facilities and grounds for social distancing compliance. If appropriate social distancing is not observed, DEEP staff will inform and educate visitors, directing them to spread out.
- Contact sports and ball games are not authorized at this time.
- Playscapes are closed.
- Special Use Licenses (SULs) and Marine Event Permits (MEPs) have been revoked through May 31, 2020. Additional revocations through June 30, 2020 may be necessary based on current public health guidance related to group gatherings.

Lower Capacity Daily Closures

Parks and forests have been evaluated as to whether their pre-existing parking capacities can be utilized while assuring proper social distancing. Most park areas can accommodate that pre-existing maximum parking capacity,

but additional parking outside of a facility cannot be allowed. Some areas (mostly larger shoreline parks) are operating on a reduced parking capacity level of as much as 25% of the total parking capacity, based on facility usage at the time. Parking capacity targets have been established for those areas based on a variety of factors, including:

- Daily observations of the number of cars and the quality of social distancing at peak times
- The size and characteristics of the park, including potential concentrations of visitors in certain areas (beaches, boardwalks, bike paths) based on facility usage at the time
- The potential for additional visitors to walk in to a park, e.g., from adjacent neighborhoods or beaches

Additional tools that can be utilized to set capacity limits include surveys and GIS overlay, and for saltwater beaches, consideration of high tides. For reference, DEEP assumes an average of 3 visitors per vehicle.

Parking capacity levels notwithstanding, park supervisors are prepared to close parks to additional visitors when the supervisor concludes that park visitation reaches a point that proper social distancing is difficult to maintain. Parks that close to capacity on a given day reopen the following day. If this approach of limited capacity closures proves unsuccessful or unsustainable, more restrictive measures such as prohibiting swimming or closing a park indefinitely will be implemented.

[Governor Lamont's Executive Order 7R](#), dated March 30, 2020, authorizes DEEP to prohibit visitors from parking outside a closed park and walking in after a facility reaches capacity. As these facilities reach capacity on busy days, staff will close the entrance to new visitors, and work (along with municipal partners in some cases) to eliminate additional visitors from parking outside the facility.

Parking Fees

Parking fee collection for **out-of-state vehicles** will begin at our Shoreline Parks (Sherwood Island, Hammonasset Beach, Silver Sands, Rocky Neck and Harkness Memorial State Parks) on Saturday, May 23, 2020. Ticket booths are being evaluated to install Plexiglas sneeze guards, dividers, and no contact credit card readers. At inland state parks, provisions are being finalized to allow out of state visitors to pay the required parking fee remotely by phone or online with a smartphone.

The [Connecticut Passport to the Parks program](#) enables DEEP to provide **free parking for Connecticut registered vehicles** at all State Parks. Capacity closures, necessary to maintain social distancing, may limit access during busier times, particularly on weekends.

Services and Amenities

Swimming and Beaches

Guidance from the Connecticut DPH indicates that recreational swimming is not a known form of transmission of COVID-19, in saltwater or freshwater. At this time, DEEP is making decisions about permitting swimming at State Parks based on considerations of potential crowding and the ability to maintain social distancing onshore, at beach locations. Accordingly, DEEP is **permitting swimming at shoreline State Parks**



based DEEP's assessment that visitors to shoreline parks can be accommodated at lower parking capacity levels, to provide for adequate social distancing on beaches.

- Visitors to beach areas at Connecticut State Parks will be asked to maintain 15' of space from other beachgoers (blanket-to-blanket). This distance will allow for a 6' radius around each person or family and a 3' walkway in between groups.
- Visitors should not expect that restroom buildings will be open, but most locations will have portable toilets available.

Based on the very limited size of our beach and swim areas at inland state parks, and current social distancing guidance **DEEP will close beaches at inland State Parks, and prohibit swimming at inland State Parks**. Again, this operational decision is based on the potential for on-shore crowding, not a concern of risk of transmission in freshwater. Park staff will monitor beach closure and educate the public to ensure compliance with the closures. DEEP will continue to review this policy in alignment with public health recommendations and will consider the reopening of designated swim areas on a case-by-case basis.

Lifeguards

Lifeguards will not be on shoreline beaches in Connecticut state parks early in the season. These beaches are currently posted as "No Lifeguards on Duty". It is expected that shoreline beaches will begin lifeguarding when adequate staffing, training, and safety practices meeting DEEP standards are in place. Swimming is prohibited at inland beaches and therefore lifeguards will not be posted at those beaches. They are currently posted as "No lifeguards on duty" and will have signs installed regarding the swimming prohibition. Lifeguards will be provided training to reduce the risk of virus transmission in the course of their duties, including providing CPR. Guidance for lifeguards is available from the [American Red Cross](#).

State Campgrounds, Cabins and Youth Sites

Campgrounds, Cabins, Youth sites, Backcountry and River Camping sites are closed until at least June 11. Additional campground reservations for the 2020 season have been postponed for the time being to prevent the need to reimburse the public for future reservations if campgrounds remain closed.

Options to open campgrounds are being considered that minimize staff and public risk. The decision will be based on current public health guidance, cleaning protocols and the availability of adequate staff and appropriate PPE.

Dogs at Connecticut State Parks

Dogs continue to be allowed at most state parks and forest recreation areas under existing rules. Dogs and other pets are required to be on a leash no longer than 7' *and* under the constant control of their owner. Dogs may not come into contact with other visitors or other dogs. Dogs are not permitted on beach areas or in swimming areas. We want to continue to allow dogs to accompany their owners for a walk or hike on public lands, but we can only do that if dog owners keep them under control and eliminate contact with other dogs and people.

Outdoor Food Counters and Snack Bars

Permanent Food Concession operations at Rocky Neck State Park and Gillette Castle State Parks are not open at this time. No final decision has yet been made for Hammonasset Beach State Park. DEEP will follow guidance

from [DECD](#) on whether and under what conditions to open concession stands at State Parks. Itinerant Food Concession operations are being reviewed on a case by case basis.

Business Processes, Procedures and Activities

Trash and Restrooms

Restroom and bathhouse facilities remain closed. Portable toilets are available in certain locations. The public is reminded to carry hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol. Visitors are reminded to “carry-in, carry-out” trash when visiting a State Park, Forest, or Boat Launch.

Enhanced Cleaning and Disinfecting Procedures

DEEP is developing guidance for staff for enhanced cleaning and disinfection for certain surfaces and features. These guidelines notwithstanding, decisions to open restrooms and bathhouses will depend in part on the availability of PPE and adequate staffing to support those functions consistent with these procedures.

Face Coverings & Other Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

Visitors are asked to bring face coverings and use them whenever they are in proximity to others. According to the [Governor Lamont’s Executive Order 7BB](#), the public is required to wear face coverings in public wherever close contact is unavoidable, unless they have a health condition that prevents it. At a park, these areas include boardwalks, parking lots, and when passing other visitors on a trail or path. Face coverings should not be worn in the water.

- DEEP employees must carry a **DEEP-issued face covering** with them at all times, and utilize it whenever in proximity to other employees or members of the public.
- DEEP employees who are working by themselves in outdoor locations where they are unlikely to encounter others are not required to wear face coverings, but should still have a face covering with them in case a situation arises that requires them to interact with others.
- When work assignments entail proximity to others on a foreseeable but occasional basis, disposable surgical-style masks or cloth face coverings are suitable. Employees should use professionally produced cloth facemasks when they are available.
- When work assignments entail likely close contact with others closer than 6’ – such as law enforcement functions and emergency response, face masks, disposable latex or nitrile gloves, and N-95 respirators should be made available for use depending on the particular function. Staff working at fee collection booths should wear disposable surgical style face covers.

Disposable latex or nitrile gloves should be used when sharing tools and when touching surfaces likely to have been frequently touched by others, and when providing customer service, such as handling money or credit cards. Hands should be washed with soap and water or cleaned with hand sanitizer before putting the gloves on and after taking them off. If gloves are unavailable, employees should frequently wash their hands with soap and water and use hand sanitizer.

State Boat Launch Operations

State boat launches will remain open as long as social distancing compliance remains in effect. At this time, we believe that the use of state boat launches can continue, safely, provided that users follow common-sense practices to reduce the risk of transmission – even when the parking areas become full. Capacity closures may still be required and would be announced through social media.

To ensure continued use by the boating community, Boating Division staff and Environmental Conservation Police Officers will be on heightened alert for non-authorized users of these facilities.

The Boating Division has posted COVID-19 related boat launch use signage at all 117 launches. The signs highlight use restrictions to boating, fishing and wildlife viewing; use of social distancing and limitations on gathering; and other boating-related separation approaches.

Environmental Conservation Police Officers and Boating Division staff are monitoring usage and social distancing compliance at boat launches and if social distancing is not observed, will inform and educate visitors to achieve compliance.

Within the boat launch facilities, one of the areas where people come within close proximity to others is the courtesy docks. The Boating Division has prepared and will soon be installing signage at the docks that restricts the docks to necessary persons only; use of social distancing and avoiding contact with other boaters; and other protective measures. Courtesy Docks have been installed at all 14 locations.

Portable toilets have been installed at the boat launches that typically have this feature. These are being cleaned on an increased schedule by the vendor.

The Boating Division expects to have Boating Education Assistants stationed at various boat launches this summer. While conducting their business, doing safety checks and aquatic invasive species education, they will be following social distancing and utilizing necessary PPE.



ATTENTION

For the safety of all, please follow these COVID-19 boat launch guidelines:

1. Parking at this facility is restricted to boating, fishing, and wildlife viewing.
2. Maintain 6-foot social distancing. Recreational gatherings of more than 5 people are prohibited.
3. Use only your own vessel and equipment.
4. Boat occupants should be household members only.
5. Depart the ramp area as quickly as possible after launching/retrieving.
6. Avoid other boaters on the water – no rafting.
7. For updates: www.portal.ct.gov/boating

COVID-19 Dock Precautions

- **Dock access is restricted to necessary persons only.**
- **Maintain 6 ft. distance from other persons at all times.**
- **All persons must wear a face covering while on the dock.**
- **Unless there is an emergency, do not assist other persons with their lines, gear, or vessel.**
- **Sanitize your hands after touching dock handrails and cleats.**



Protect Yourself and Others

News and Communication

@CTStateParks Twitter feed will be utilized to make real time capacity closure announcements for state parks and forests.

@CTBoatingInfo Twitter feed will be utilized to make real time capacity closure announcements for boating access areas.

Enforcement

Although law enforcement personnel have the authority to enforce social distancing and group size guidance, we hope that visitors will take personal responsibility and make sure they comply. DEEP will always try to educate first and ask people to follow the rules. However, if people are blatantly ignoring the new rules they may be asked to leave the park and/or face further enforcement action as required if actions and behavior are not corrected. If our Parks are overrun with too many visitors who are not practicing social distancing or adhering to recommended group sizes, we may be forced to close more parks during this public health emergency.

The potential penalty for violation of any Executive Order, including [Governor Lamont's Executive Order 7R](#) prohibiting entry into a Park when its closed, during the course of a public health emergency can be a fine up to one thousand dollars or imprisoned not more than one year, or both, for each offense per C.G.S. 19a-131a(d).

Operational Plans Subject to Change

Daily observations and reporting of visitation at facilities will continue. Evaluation of that information will result in additional changes to allowed capacity, and perhaps other visitor management techniques, including consideration of limitation of hours of operation, and closure of specific facilities, with a statewide closure as a last resort if social distancing is not being maintained. Evaluation is ongoing of other parks (or features within parks) that may need to be closed due to persistent inability or unwillingness to practice proper social distancing.